



## **Aging Planning Bulletin for Aging Leadership Planning Teams**

### **Wandering Behavior: Prevention and Safety**

#### **Background Information**

Over 150,000 older adults in North Carolina have Alzheimer's disease or other dementias, and by 2025, the number will increase to over 250,000. As symptoms of the disease become more pronounced, as many as 70 percent of people who have Alzheimer's or another dementia will wander away from where they are living at least once. Whether they live in the community with a caregiver or in an institution, wanderers are at great risk because they no longer recognize dangerous or threatening circumstances. If they are not found within 24 hours, up to half may die. This planning bulletin outlines 3 strategies for increasing the safety of this vulnerable population. They are (1) Silver Alert, the state's new special emergency alert system for missing persons with dementia or other debilitating mental illness; (2) search-and-rescue tracking programs such as Project Lifesaver for special needs population; and (3) The Alzheimer's Association's MedicAlert + Safe Return program.

#### **Strategies**

**N.C. Silver Alert:** In order to help protect the increasing number of adults that have dementia or other cognitive impairments, the NC General Assembly established the Silver Alert Program in 2007. NC is one of 7 states to have implemented such a program. Silver alert, similar to the national Amber alert for missing and endangered children, was designed to quickly disseminate descriptive information about a missing person who is believed to be suffering from dementia or other cognitive impairments. This is done through the cooperative effort of the NC Department of Crime Control & Public Safety, state law enforcement, radio and television broadcasters, and the NC Department of Transportation.

When a caregiver reports a missing individual, the local law enforcement agency must first investigate the case and determine if it qualifies for a Silver Alert. The criteria are as follows:

- The person is believed to be suffering from dementia or other cognitive impairment
- The person is believed to be missing, regardless of circumstance
- A legal custodian of the missing person has submitted a missing person's report
- Law enforcement has entered the information into the National Criminal Information Center system
- Law enforcement reports the incident to the NC Center for Missing Persons.

The NC Center for Missing Persons is the only agency that has the statutory authority to issue the Silver Alert and will do so only at the request of a law enforcement agency. Silver Alert is designed to quickly notify the surrounding community and aforementioned outlets about the missing person by:

- Notifying media
- Initiating a statewide "be on the lookout" bulletin to all appropriate law enforcement agencies
- Providing a 24-hour phone number to receive calls during the investigation
- Activate phone calls in the immediate area using a type of reverse 911 system for wandering only

- Requesting the NCDOT to activate highway message signs (if appropriate)
- Providing activation guidance and support to law enforcement agencies on procedures
- Canceling the alert once the person is located

The Center maintains statistical information regarding the Silver Alert Program.

**Project Lifesaver:** Provides a wristwatch-sized device that can be tracked using receiver/transmitter technology. The hand held receiver has a range of several miles and indicates direction and rough distance to the wandering person. The system is sold only to police departments. The implementation cost includes electronic tracking equipment and a comprehensive two-day training course for law enforcement, search and rescue organizations and public safety personnel on how to operate the equipment. This is in conjunction with an established proactive profile and monitoring program to locate missing persons with dementia, or to locate children with Autism and persons with Down's Syndrome. Not only does this program save lives, but also a significant amount of money in staff time and resources. To aid with the start-up costs, many agencies joining Project Lifesaver have received financial support from civic, fraternal, and service clubs as well as through partnerships with hospitals and other community service organizations.

**MedicAlert + the Alzheimer's Association's Safe Return:** The Alzheimer's Association's Safe Return program recently partnered with MedicAlert. This new program provides an identification bracelet or pendant to be worn by the individual at risk of wandering. Once the wanderer is located, a citizen or officer calls the toll free emergency response number on the identification product and the individual's caregivers are contacted. There is an enrollment fee for the MedicAlert + Safe Return program as well as a small annual renewal fee. The Eastern North Carolina Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association conducts trainings with police officers on the program so they can provide information to anyone who might benefit from it.

#### **Questions and Suggestions for Local Planning Teams:**

- Is the county sheriff's department a member of Project Lifesaver or does it know of this program?
- What is the opinion of the sheriff's department and other key stakeholders (e.g., caregiver support groups, Alzheimer's Association) on such a program?

#### **Contact and Resource Information:**

- The NC Silver Alert Program: [www.nccrimecontrol.org](http://www.nccrimecontrol.org). Lois Hogan, Program Director [lhogan@ncale.org](mailto:lhogan@ncale.org)
- Project Lifesaver: [www.projectlifesaver.org](http://www.projectlifesaver.org) or (877) 580-5433
- MedicAlert + Safe Return: [http://www.alz.org/we\\_can\\_help\\_medicalert\\_safereturn.asp](http://www.alz.org/we_can_help_medicalert_safereturn.asp)
- The Alzheimer's Association: Eastern NC Chapter: (800) 228-8738
- Pilot International: <http://www.pilotinternational.org/html/home.shtml> for possible funding opportunities

For more information contact Karisa Derence at 919-733-8400 or [karisa.derence@ncmail.net](mailto:karisa.derence@ncmail.net)